

December 30, 2005: NORTON CITES KATRINA AND RECENT CRITICAL REPORTS AS EVIDENCE...

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 30, 2005

NORTON CITES KATRINA AND RECENT CRITICAL REPORTS AS EVIDENCE THAT NATION CANNOT RESPOND TO A MAJOR DISASTER

Washington, DC — Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), a member of two committees with homeland security oversight responsibilities, said that taken together, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Inspector General's report and another by Democrats on the Homeland Security Committee, both released this week, together with the tragic Katrina fiasco, demonstrate that "our country is not prepared to respond to a major disaster of any kind." Norton, a member of the Homeland Security Committee and ranking member of the Transportation Committee subcommittee with primary oversight over the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said, "Katrina was a proxy, a virtual dress rehearsal, for a terrorist attack that laid bare for the world to see that we are not yet capable of responding quickly or adequately to a major surprise attack. Al Qaeda does not give a three day 'weather report' warning that it is coming." She said the problems rest both with DHS, which she said is "seriously dysfunctional" two years after its creation, and the absence of the "in-depth, critical oversight of the Department by the Republican Congress that was especially needed following the creation of the largest federal department since the establishment of the Pentagon." She said that she never expected such a diverse set of agencies, which now have both security and traditional domestic responsibilities, to come together in a couple of years. Realistically, the complexities involved, the unprecedented nature of the mission itself, and the revised structure make a satisfactory, major structural change a five to ten year proposition, she said. Congresswoman Norton, who also serves on the Aviation Subcommittee, said that the Department has made progress on a number of significant issues, particularly in aviation security where the major post-9/11 energy has gone, but also in other areas of public concern. However, after 9/11, "many of us have pressed and had every right to expect the Department to prioritize its new mission and to deliver on many more of the security basics, but these reports and other evidence show that this has not occurred." For example, Norton is so concerned, as ranking member of the subcommittee that shares jurisdiction over FEMA with the Homeland Security Committee, that she is an original co-sponsor, along with the top Democratic and Republican leadership of the Transportation Committee, of a bill to remove FEMA from DHS. Although she continues to support bringing most anti-terrorism agencies under the Department, the Congresswoman said that FEMA needs to become once again "a nimble, special forces-type agency, unencumbered by bureaucracy of any kind, that can hit the ground running," a model that she said proved itself in the 1990s. Since its absorption into DHS, for example, FEMA funds that were needed for natural disasters too often were redirected to far less high-risk homeland security matters "unnecessarily within the Department, but aided and abetted by a Congress that stubbornly continues to distribute DHS funds to every nook and cranny of our country, regardless of terrorism risk." A somewhat more risk-based compromise passed the House this year in the DHS reauthorization bill, but the Senate has yet to agree on a risk-based approach, now strongly advocated by DHS.

The Democratic report entitled "Leaving the Nation at Risk: 33 Unfulfilled Promises From the Department of Homeland Security" was not a partisan evaluation, but relied mainly on direct quotations from DHS leadership on promised changes that have not yet been made or fully implemented in virtually every critical area of homeland security — from critical infrastructure protection and chemical plants to border security and intelligence sharing with state and local jurisdictions. Norton, the lead sponsor of the Secure TRAINS Act, cited as an example promise #12 of the Democratic report concerning assessments of risks to rail and transit networks. The report refers to a General Accounting Office (GAO) criticism of conflicting assessments within DHS of the same transit systems, casting doubt on whether the vulnerabilities to rail and mass transit systems in large urban areas like the nation's capital have been adequately assessed. Norton said that the evidence from the Madrid and London attacks shows that Al Qaeda is moving its focus to the transportation systems used by the average American. Yet, despite 9 billion passenger trips daily on rail and mass transit, neither DHS nor Congress has given the necessary, sustained attention to the unique security dilemmas raised by protecting subways, rail and other mass and freight transportation and infrastructure. When Congress returns, she said she intends to seek a competent, comprehensive assessment, particularly considering the continuing controversy about toxic freight traveling near the Capitol, through neighborhoods in the District and the entire national capital region, and in high density areas throughout the country.

Norton pays special attention to homeland security matters because she represents the nation's capital. "I have more reason than most of my colleagues to pay attention — and to feel vulnerable" she said.